

Courage in Action

IN CLINTON, TENNESSEE

by WILMA DYKEMAN AND JAMES STOKELY

Clinton, Tennessee
ANYONE WHO HAS spent his life in a small Southern town can remember a soft summer evening when the day's work and worry were temporarily stilled and in that moment just between twilight and darkness the soothing music from a Negro church on the fringes of town floated effortlessly across all the visible and invisible barriers, pleading: "Just a closer walk with Thee—"

Many who still live in the Southern towns but have not forgotten the message are discovering that it is not always effortless or peaceful to find a closer walk with their consciences, their Christianity or their citizenship. But there are those who keep walking—taking the decisive first steps, the cumulative long strides. Those who live outside the South and register only despair over its dilemma should find a measure of wonder and joy in the enormous courage these everyday citizens are displaying every day. Their fortitude is doubly admirable in a region which stresses sociability and where their adversaries are not foreign invaders but next-door neighbors beside whom they will probably continue to spend the rest of their lives.

Such a one is the minister in Clinton, Tennessee, who recently gave new meaning to the words of that old spiritual. As one townsman said, "When we all got up here that Tuesday morning, we had two big questions nobody was very anxious to face, much less answer: what about the Negro kids who had stayed out of high school since the Wednesday before because they'd taken

about all the petty torment they could? And what about the city election we were holding that day, with the White Citizens' Council in its first test of strength? By that night, those questions were on the way to being answered, or at least a lot better clarified in our minds. And Turner was the biggest reason why."

LATE IN November a stalemate had been reached in the desegregation situation at Clinton High School. A small gang, estimated by teachers at between forty and fifty out of the more than 700 white students in school, had concentrated on making life unbearable for the dozen Negro pupils. Some of the gang had been out of school since early autumn and had apparently returned only for the purposes of the recently organized White Youth Council. As the school faculty pointed out in a joint statement: "The activities of this small group in our school have been of a vicious nature, obviously prompted by a mature person." But by the last Wednesday of November they had achieved part of their goal—the Negro children were staying away from school.

"We'd had all we could bear," one Negro mother said. "We wanted some assurance our children wouldn't be harmed before we let them walk into that school again."

Principal D. J. Brittain, Jr. gave the Negro youngsters the same stalwart personal support he had given since school opened, but the school board said it could not make the guarantee the Negro parents wanted. Local police seemed ineffective and federal authorities made no public move to meet the crisis. The Negro children were out of school and the White Citizens' Council members were triumphant.

Then, on Monday, December 3, the Reverend Paul W. Turner sent word to the Negro children that if

they wanted to return to school he would come and walk with them. The next morning the thirty-three-year-old minister walked past the big solid First Baptist Church where he has preached for eight years, down the main street decorated with lights and garlands and good-will greetings for the Christmas season, around the corner at the old brick courthouse where segregationist-agitator John Kasper had only recently been acquitted in his second trial for inciting to riot, and down the street to the high school which serves both Clinton and surrounding Anderson County. A block beyond the school building a steep hill rises. The Rev. Turner now had two fellow townsmen walking with him: Sidney Davis and Leo Burnett, and the three of them climbed about halfway up the hill. There they were met by six Negro boys and girls. The little group went down the hill, past a huddle of perhaps fifty jeering white people, and the children went safely into the school. Davis and Burnett went back about their day's business, and Turner started for his church. Some of the gang outside the school followed him. A block away a half-dozen of them closed in. In the broad daylight of an unseasonably warm winter morning, on a downtown sidewalk in front of a small, well-occupied office building, the minister of the town's largest church was beaten up. Before the police arrived his blood had splattered the car near which he stood and stained the sidewalk.

NEWS of the attack blazed through Clinton like a leaf-fire. There were two immediate results. School was closed (a teacher had also been shoved around by two non-students who had entered the building during the morning and asked where they could find one of the Negroes). But the city polls stayed open—and instead of activity dwindling during

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the afternoon as is usual in small-town elections, there was actually a waiting line at times. The man and the event and the moment had met with rare fortuitousness that morning.

Trying to discover what happens when a man takes the right step at the right time, we talked with some of the people here.

"Remember, we're not called the Bible belt without reason. Turner wasn't just anyone getting mauled. He was a symbol, too. What happened, happened to us all—and it waked us up."

"Somebody had to do it. And it wasn't going to be my husband and it wasn't going to be any of the others that have businesses here in town. Most of us had shaken our heads over the Citizens' Council and what it stood for, but we'd gone right ahead pussy-footing and passing-the-buck. Paul Turner stuck his neck out for all of us."

"We don't think niggers ought to be mixed in the school or preachers mixed in any of it. The whole thing is that people here was raised to associate with niggers in their place. I ain't got nothing against them but they don't have no right to associate 100 per cent with white folks. We want them to have an education, it would be sure bad enough to have them running around like a bunch of heathens."

"They's a lot of white folks around here in league with that NAACP. White niggers is worse than black."

"The Communist Jews are behind it all. Frankfurter and Baruch and all them. They want an exuse to get things all tore up."

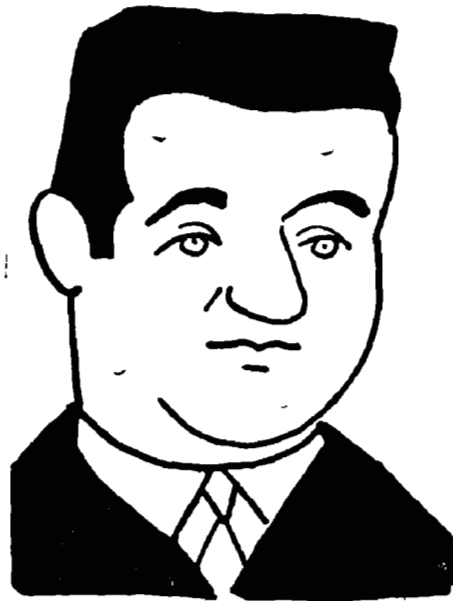
"You might call Paul the catalytic agent we needed to bring this whole thing into the open. The whole White Citizens' Council ticket for mayor and aldermen was defeated four to one. People who'd been afraid to speak up before spoke out with their ballots."

THESE men in their small-town offices and stores, these women in their neat yards and living rooms, these casual conversationalists along the streets, made vivid the fact that sometimes the most important step a citizen of a democracy can take

is that short walk to the voting booth.

We went to see Paul Turner. His modest red brick house was filled with the buoyant sound of two small children, three years and eighteen months, and the pungent odor of dinner cooking in his wife, Jane's, kitchen. Six-feet, blue-eyed, friendly and relaxed, he did not talk glibly nor heroically about what had happened.

"Back in the fall when the first violence came, I didn't see what I could do to be effective except through my pulpit. The community didn't realize what was happening. We were all caught off guard. Action at the state level was the only answer. But this time we knew bet-



The Reverend Paul Turner

ter what was going on. The hour had come when someone had to make a move or these people would win the day. Someone had to step out—and I guess I was elected. As things developed during the week and the Negro children were intimidated out of school, I began to think what I could do. First, of course, I could preach to my congregation about it on Sunday. Then on Monday I could act. And that's what I did."

"Was your congregation behind you?"

"A minister and his congregation have to move together. Mr. Davis, one of the men who went with me,

is the chairman of my Board of Deacons. The superintendent of our Sunday School and his wife came down here and slept at our house the night after this happened. If I walked back up the hill now I think I'd have a good crowd with me." He smiles a slow, broad smile.

"Why did they beat you and not the other two who were with you?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe they thought the other men might have pistols," he grins again. "They know a minister wouldn't be armed—at least with firearms."

We asked a young lawyer in town about the two men who had walked with the Reverend Turner. "Sid Davis is an attorney here in Clinton. He was on his way over to Knoxville that morning when he heard his minister was going to go bring the Negro children back to school. Sid is absolutely fearless. Maybe foolhardy. But he just went over and told Turner he'd go along. As for Leo Burnett, he's an accountant down here at the hosiery mill, not a member of Turner's church. But he got an idea of what this was all about before most of the rest of us. He was one of those John Kasper talked with when he first came down from Washington to stir up trouble back in August. Leo was out mowing his yard and this stranger came up and asked him if he believed in integration. Leo said no. Then Kasper went on to tell him about the tyranny of the Supreme Court, that it was like it was back in the days of England against the colonies. Leo told Kasper he might be against integration but hell, he didn't want to start a revolution and for Kasper to get out of his yard."

MANY OF the complexities of the Clinton situation are involved in that encounter. Chief among them is the dilemma of the great immobilized group, not only in Clinton but throughout the South, which does not want integration but does want to abide by the law. Faced on one hand with the immovable object of federal law, and on the other with the apparently irresistible force of elements which are always ready to resort to violence, they have been caught in a vacuum, without leader-

ship and perhaps without precedent.

Probably 90 percent of the people of Clinton prefer segregation in the schools. Yet the overwhelming majority of their children accepted the Negro students into their midst with good will: they elected one Negro girl vice president of her class and when the school was closed the Student Council passed a resolution asking that classes be resumed as soon as possible and on an integrated basis. The parents themselves rejected the segregationist organization at the polls.

For those who can accept the reality that democracy is not perfection but a process working on the premise of perfectibility, it may not be premature to say that the unfolding story of Clinton reveals cause for quiet optimism.

"I used to think of myself as a segregationist," one man confides. "Now I'm not so sure. It's come to more than a matter of labels here, anyway. Whatever else I may or may not think I am, I know I'm for law and order."

Another man says: "A little while ago everybody around here started everything they said with, 'Now I'm not for integration, understand, but I don't like what these folks are doing—.' Now there's none of that prefacing' and—but' business. We just say, 'I'm against that crowd.'"

It seems clear that here, in the showdown, the organized segregationist movement has demonstrated the extremity of violence to which it will resort. The White Citizens' Council, which have always asserted they stood for peaceful means, must have found here that it is hard to be *a little but* lawless. In a region which has always flaunted an individualistic attitude toward the law, it must be a thoughtless man or group indeed who sanctions disregard for the nation's highest tribunal.

AS FEDERAL authorities arrested sixteen of the alleged ringleaders among the troublemakers, Deep South segregationists realized that successful integration at Clinton would threaten their whole program and they launched a clever campaign of sympathy for "Clinton's citizens." Some of the newspapers pointed out

that integration cannot be enforced if "the citizens" don't want it; Seaboard Citizens' Council leader John Kasper said in Washington that segregationists will spill their blood before bowing "to a creeping federal dictatorship"; a well-known Georgia attorney accused the Tennessee federal judge of "establishing a government of fear, rather than law"; "Ace" Carter of the North Alabama White Citizens' Council protested to Attorney General Brownell that in Clinton "Christian, God-fearing men, women and children are handcuffed and thrown into prison"; Governor Griffin of Georgia sent a personal check contributing to a legal fund for the "oppressed citizens" of Clinton. These self-appointed spokesmen cannot afford to admit that they have already been repudiated four-to-one by this citizenry. In fact, the people of Clinton have learned at first-hand that the high-flown language of nullification is kissing-kin to the brutal fist that smashes into a minister's face because he protects law-abiding children.

If outside agitators will leave Clinton to work out its own problems, if the Deep South will permit the border South this boon it is always demanding for itself from the North, the story of this town may well become one of the meaningful episodes in our national history. As school principal D. J. Brittain, Jr. said a few days ago: "We're not fighting these people for Clinton or Anderson county. We're fighting for the entire South." And if the struggle at Clinton is resolved in justice, no man will deserve higher honor from his town, his county, the South or the entire nation than Principal Brittain. Thin, bespectacled, almost frail in appearance, this man has withstood with iron determination, for better than three months, the daily onslaughts of those who would wreck his school.

The student body as a whole has supported its principal with rare devotion and steadfastness. Tired and disillusioned by some of the citizenry he feels has failed to step out and support him when he often seemed to stand alone, Principal Brittain hopes that with federal intervention

in bringing the troublemakers to account his school may have a chance to do its job: educate all the children of its community without fear or favor.

There are others who have shared his hope and worked to make it real, too: editor Horace Wells, who has used his weekly newspaper to prick the consciences of Clinton and defy the rabble-rousers; young lawyer Buford Lewallen who, with attorney Leo Grant, Jr. from nearby Oak Ridge, led in forming the Home Guard when violence erupted at the opening of school, and who has since been attacked both verbally and physically.

THE Negro community knows who these people are. "Principal Brittain and all the teachers—they've been fine to the children," one Negro woman says.

Or one of the Negro girls who walked to school December 4: "Rev. Turner was wonderful. When we came down the hill and saw some people waiting there outside the school he just kept saying to us, 'Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. I won't let them hurt you.'" The girl's mother listens with tears brimming in her wide brown eyes. "He knows courage all right. But I think he must have had something else too. Mr. Turner must know love."

This time of decision in the South may force America to abandon the romantic fiction that all her heroes walk in twenty-league boots with never a misstep. Those who are leading the way to law and order in Clinton wear ordinary human shoes—and sometimes falter. But if, during the coming months, they win their struggle, we may all be brought into a closer fresher walk with that weary phrase, "grass-roots democracy."

On December 10 Clinton High School reopened. The Negro students were once more in their seats; the hoodlums were gone and peace reigned. What was it the teacher of Paul Turner's conscience said? "Suffer the little children, of *whatever color*, to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such are the kingdom of God."